Term Paper Outline Sample Comments

2/27/12

How was the cold war influential to literature during this time period?

My first novel *Slaughterhouse 5* by Kurt Vonnegut was written in the 1960s, well into the deep parts of the cold war and near its climax which was the Cuban missile crisis when the United States and the Soviet Union were on the brink of nuclear war. Vonnegut’s novel is focused on death and the atrocities that war and pain do to people. It uses repetition of a certain phrase throughout the novel, and he uses symbols such as certain characters to show his distaste of war. In addition, Vonnegut makes the characters in the book mention specific references to people such as RFK and Martin Luther King Jr.

1. The first technique that is used is using symbols such as characters to show Vonnegut’s distaste for war.

* He uses the character Roland Weary as a person that everyone hates, and Weary is a person who is obsessed with warfare and weapons. He talks constantly about torture devices, and he is disillusioned with war. When Billy Pilgrim is back in WWII he gets lost with Weary and Weary is so disillusioned that the scouts that are with them talk about ditching him, Vonnegut uses this character to represent the people who are war hawks, and how in the end it doesn’t work out with Weary’s unlikable character and his eventual death.
* Billy represents the unlikely war hero. He goes through the horrors of the bombing of Dresden, but does not talk about it after. He gets married and has children and a wife, but eventually the experiences that he went through get to him, and he goes on a mental episode and travels to new York to go on the radio and talks about how aliens have abducted him before, and how he was there for a long time but they brought him back so quick that it seemed like he was never missing.
* The article also talks about Billy, and his connection to the war and it mentions how he cried un-expectantly for no reason at all. The article also goes so far as to say that the plane crash that Billy experienced was related to Dresden with the trauma he experienced.

Inquiry Question: How do authors understand mental crisis and what techniques do they use to convey characterization?

The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath

1. The first Person narrative point of view
   1. Esther Greenwood is the protagonist of the novel. Her point of view documents her mental breakdown and helps the reader truly understand what she is going through. Her depression and schizophrenic tendencies are truly highlighted in her thoughts and perception of the world. When I read this novel I felt as though I could understand her completely due to the point of view of the novel. Her stream of consciousness and flashbacks help to understand her complex character. Her suicidal actions almost seem justifiable because I as a reader have understood her anguish and her past. I feel as though I can understand Esther completely due to the fact that she is the one that tells her own story.

Is it possible to find some sort of purpose in life? How does the human mind cope with its inability to understand some aspects of the outside world? How is Camus’ belief of the impossibility of human certainty manifested in his characters?

1. The Stranger
   1. There is no true “meaning” to life. Human actions and environmental occurrences are completely spontaneous. The world is indifferent to the thoughts, beliefs and hopes of man. Man attempts to avoid this fact by superimposing his own order onto an irrational world. Camus’s character Meursault becomes aware of the absurdity of the universe and comes to accept it.
      1. The sun and light as symbols
         1. Page 9: “I asked him if he could turn off one of the lights. The glare on the white walls was making me drowsy. He said he couldn’t. That was how they’d been wired: it was all or nothing.”
            1. Although his mother has just died, and Meursault sits at her wake, he is preoccupied in the material rather than the emotional. In fact, throughout the entire novel he seems to never even touch upon the emotional aspects of life. He is worried about the brightness of the room, and talks constantly about the color white, the opposite of the common mourning color: black.
         2. Page 59: “ The Arab drew hid knife and held it up to me in the sun. The light shot off the steel and it was like a long flashing blade cutting at my forehead. At the same instant the sweat in my eyebrows dripped down over my eyelids all at once and covered them with a warm, thick film. My eyes were blinded behind the curtain of tears and salt. All I could feel were the cymbals of sunlight crashing on my forehead, and, indistinctly, the dazzling spear flying up from the knife in front of me. The scorching blade slashed at my eyelashes and stabbed at my stinging eyes. That’s when everything began to reel.”
            1. Just as Meursault is about to kill the Arab, his behavior is peculiar. (Not particularly peculiar for Meursault, but extremely so for the average man.) All he can think about is the heat of the sun. He seems to be experiencing some sort of migraine. The knife becomes, “a long flashing blade cutting at [his] forehead.” Meursault says that he feels “the cymbals of sunlight crashing on [his] forehead.” Is this reason enough to kill, though? The heat, a migraine? It seems ridiculous; it seems *absurd*. Camus’ point is that Meursault needs to reason, everything in life is random.

How have authors portrayed the psychological impact of war and combat on the individual soldier? What overall messages have authors used these portrayals to send?

* + - 1. McDermott argues in “Symbolism and Psychological Realism in The Red Badge of Courage,” “At the final point in the story, heroic action and mature motivation have at last converged in Fleming's character; in symbolic terms his inner and his outer red badges have coalesced into a complex but coherent unity, and as the novel closes he is a very human but nonetheless triumphant embodiment of the virtue of courage. And, of course, in the context of the novel it is this achievement which has conferred manhood upon him” (330). McDermott also says, “[Henry] has discovered and developed within himself a capacity for a detached spirit of self-sacrifice based on an imperfect but nonetheless profound self-knowledge. He has matured; he has become a man” (331). I find McDermott’s analysis of Henry to be a flawed praise of self-sacrifice that is representative of the same collectivist philosophy that has driven Henry and millions of others to enlist and risk their lives for the proverbial cause “larger than themselves” in the first place. (Much of my analysis of McDermott’s essay will be a critique of these collectivist overtones.) I do not, and will never, consider such an opinion respectable.
      2. My thinking is far more in line with Dillingham’s than with McDermott’s. Dillingham takes what I view as an Objectivist stance on the issue, arguing, “Through witnessing [Henry’s] actions and changing sensations we discover the emerging paradox of courage: human courage is by its nature subhuman; in order to courageous, a man in time of physical strife must abandon the highest of his human facilities, reasons and imagination, and act instinctively, even animalistically” (194). Dillingham recognizes the negative message that Crane is presenting, and he consequently rejects the notion that man must act “selflessly,” writing “[Henry] becomes a prideful animal, seeking the throat of the enemy with self-forgetfulness” (196). Certainly this is not what society should want of its citizens.
* Consider answers to your questions in terms of **themes**, i.e. the overall meanings of the stories. Themes should account for the **complexity** of the texts, and the complexity of answers to your inquiry question. In other words, your argument/thesis should reflect the nuances of the story, and the varied point of view each author presents.

Examples of specific, complex themes from *The Dew Breaker* in-class essay thesis statements:

Even the most evil of people are capable of both suffering and need for love.

Certain actions cannot be forgiven, and good and evil exist side by side in the world.

While the book speaks out against the cruelty of 20th –century Haiti, the author also makes a point about human behavior: silence stunts the progress of the human psyche; it rules over people like a dicatatorship, and holds the mind hostage against its own thoughts. Only by voicing their feelings are people able to confront their pasts and move on from them.

Through the story of Ka’s father, his guilt over his misdeeds, the forgiveness shown to him, and his ultimate redemption, Edwidge Danticat expresses her belief that good and evil are temporary states of being, and that people should not be classified as merely good or evil.